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SUBJECT: NAHR AL-BARID REMAINS CALM AWAITING DECISION ON
CAMP RECONSTRUCTION

REF: BEIRUT 0967

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Michele J. Sison for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: UN Relief and Works Agency Director (UNRWA) Salvatore Lombardo and Ambassador Khalil Makkawi, Director of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), remain cautiously optimistic that the State Shura Council will decide on October 13 to permit resumption of reconstruction of the Nahr Al-Barid (NAB) Palestinian refugee camp, dismissing MP Michel Aoun's lawsuit to stop the backfilling of recently discovered archeological sites. Even with a decision to resume work, UNRWA authorities believe late 2010 is the earliest time refugees could begin to move into new homes and shops. Palestinian protests over the work stoppage have been minimal, an encouraging sign that refugees believe the government's intentions to rebuild are genuine. End summary.

IN THE COURT'S HANDS

12. (C) Political machinations by Free Patriotic Movement leader Aoun could not influence the outcome of the pending lawsuit to stop reconstruction in NAB, Ambassador Makkawi told a select audience of UNRWA officials and UNRWA donor country ambassadors during a September 29 dinner hosted by the Ambassador in honor of UNRWA Commissioner General Karen Abu-Zayd. Answering rumors that Aoun might withdraw his suit (reftel) in exchange for concessions in cabinet formation negotiations, Makkawi explained that the suit cannot be withdrawn by Aoun once presented to the Shura Council. The court has no choice but to decide the case, Makkawi declared. In a September 26 conversation with DCM, Makkawi had stated his confidence that the GOL's case for continuing construction was very strong, especially if the court considered the "national security" repercussions of a decision to stop work permanently. Makkawi also explained that the presidency of the three-judge Shura Council would rotate on October 1, at which time he believed the possibility of getting the "right" decision would improve. (Note: In spite of Makkawi's optimism, UNRWA Deputy Director Roger Davies relayed to poloff on October 7 that caretaker Prime Minister Fouad Siniora had cautioned Abu-Zayd that he believed Aoun would seek an extension to the work suspension. End note.)

MINIMAL PALESTINIAN PROTESTS

13. (C) In a separate September 29 meeting, UNRWA's NAB reconstruction project manager Charlie Higgins told poloff that lack of demonstrations by NAB refugees and in other Palestinian camps indicated that the camp leadership understood disruptive protests were not to their advantage. He cautioned, however, that a demonstration led by the Nahr Al-Barid Reconstruction Committee had been scheduled for October 12 in downtown Beirut. Higgins judged the lack of protests was partially due to NAB residents' "fear" of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) following the 2007 fighting in NAB and the LAF's high-profile presence in and around the camp. Higgins acknowledged that UNRWA efforts to communicate with Palestinian leadership in all the 12 camps helped convince refugees that UNRWA and the government still intend to rebuild despite the suit. Higgins noted that UNRWA interlocutors had not discouraged protests but had cautioned refugees to control tempers and avoid violent outbreaks.

RIPPLE EFFECTS OF CURRENT STOPPAGE

14. (C) Higgins cautioned that even with a positive court outcome and an immediate restart of work, the first phase of construction could not be completed until late fall of 2010 at the earliest. He explained that due to the ruins discovered, there is not enough room to dig vertically to place various utility conduits. Construction designs must be reworked to accommodate underground pipes for water, sewage, and electrical wiring side-by-side rather than stacked vertically. Higgins hoped to move the first 400 to 500 families into new apartments next fall if there were no other delays since he noted that delays put a great strain on

UNRWA-provided rent subsidies, which are the largest component of its recovery and emergency aid (RERA) funds. As of September, UNRWA held about \$3 million in RERA funds, and it was expending nearly \$450,000 monthly for rent subsidies alone. UNRWA would eventually need to tap into the still-unused \$5 million RERA donation received from the U.S. in June, Higgins predicted.

LAF EASES CAMP ACCESS

15. (C) After reconstruction issues, camp access was the next most sensitive concern for camp residents, Lombardo noted. He explained that the LAF, after much negotiation with UNRWA, would adjust its access procedures to make the camp more accessible to daily commuters and commercial vendors. Lombardo confirmed that starting in October the LAF would, on a six-month trial basis, allow Lebanese citizens access to the camp without requiring the normal entrance permit. Lombardo expected this action to have a moderate affect on improving commerce but caveated that residents could see the action as a discriminatory act benefiting only Lebanese. Lombardo also reported that Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) would begin to man a few checkpoints on a permanent basis. He believed that step would improve relations between camp residents and the ISF and reduce the LAF presence, an element that he said creates anxiety with camp residents.

OTHER CAMP NEEDS NEGLECTED

16. (C) Both Makkawi and Lombardo emphasized to donors the need to maintain focus on other necessities of the estimated 400,000 refugees in the other refugee camps throughout Lebanon. Lombardo, who described UNRWA's financial situation as "depressing," underscored that the many NAB reconstruction donation requests had diverted attention from broader camp needs, such as health care and education. UNRWA had done much in raising Palestinian perceptions that "someone cares," Lombardo underscored, pointing to UNRWA's progress in establishing primary health care clinics and modern school facilities.

17. (C) COMMENT: Our interlocutors are optimistic that the work stoppage will not last, but they also admit they have no

alternative plan in case of an unfavorable court decision.
Nevertheless, the current lack of Palestinian agitation
indicates that camp residents are still giving the
authorities the benefit of the doubt.
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